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AUTHOR Roberts, Susan M.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues surrounding the study of higher education, usually involving the analysis of structural-functionalism, to less tradition-bound areas representing idealism. It examines these issues through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism which, it is noted, rests in the interpretive paradigm. The paper begins with a discussion of pragmatism, considered to be the philosophical underpinning of symbolic interactionism. Next, phenomenologocial symbolic interaction is examined, including its assumptions and its concepts of identity, role, situation, and the notions of role-making and role-taking. Also, the methodological implications of symbolic interactionism are discussed, as well as its limitations as a theoretical framework. Finally, the contributions of symbolic interactionism used in research in higher education are explored. Contains 21 references. (GLR)

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Exploring Alternative Paradigms in Higher Education Research: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Susan M. Roberts
University of Southern Maine

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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Park Plaza Hotel & Towers in Boston, Massachusetts, October 31-November 3, 1991. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Exploring Alternative Paradigms in Higher Education Research: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

There is a growing body of literature that challenges us to examine the world of higher education from perspectives other than those associated with structural-functionalism. For instance, Tierney (1987; 1988) explores higher education as a culture and identifies what he believes to be essential cultural components. Kuh & Whitt (1988) seem to have the same purpose in The Invisible Tapestry, and Chaffee & Tierney (1988) link understanding organizational culture with the identification of appropriate strategic decision-making processes. In these examples, the attempt is to move away from exploring culture as something that is 'out there' and to which people conform or not (a structural-functionalist perspective), and toward exploring culture as a construct that is continuously shaped and reshaped by its participants. Viewing culture in this way supports the philosophical position that reality does not exist a priori in the social world, that the world is composed of multiple realities and is, as Berger and Luckmann (1979) point out to us, socially constructed.

As one moves away from the conventional paradigmatic wisdom representing realism, in this case, structural-functionalism, and into less tradition-bound territory representing idealism, in this case interpretivism, the challenge remains to constantly match methods and analyses with paradigm and theory (Blumer, 1986). Thus, in higher education, whether one speaks of the idealist view of reality as an emergent paradigm which reflects its growing popularity (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Whitt, et. al., 1990) or as an enacted environment to capture the importance of social interaction to the paradigm (Tierney, 1988; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985), what remains important is that we ensure that the assumptions underlying our

perspective are not forgotten. These assumptions should frame and guide the epistemology. Equally important for higher education research are the methods we use to explore alternative paradigms. The questions we use and the approaches we take ought to coincide with our view of the empirical world. Finally, there is the notion of theory and the applicability and usefulness of a given perspective in understanding the world of higher education.

This paper explores these issues through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism was selected over other theoretical frameworks representing alternative paradigms for a number of reasons. First, representative of a philosophical split among its proponents, symbolic interactionism seems to have one foot in structural-functionalism and one in interpretivism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). While the focus of this paper is on the alternative, interpretive paradigm, this philosophical split provides an opportunity to at least point out the subtle differences between the two schools of thought and, therefore, between structural-functionalism and interpretivism.

Second, reflective of its pragmatic roots, symbolic interactionism perceives the social world as one that is best understood through the experiences of the individual actor. Thus, the methodological implications relate to approaches that facilitate direct examination of the social world. An example is that of observation. Third, in light of the philosophical and methodological perspective that symbolic interactionism brings to the research setting, the strengths include a mandate for indepth examination of the social world from the actor's point of view. This means that symbolic interactionism sometimes has difficulty grappling with larger concepts such as culture. Finally, because of its focus on the individual actor, symbolic interactionism is a useful perspective from which to glean a richer portrait of the

social world of higher education from those who experience it, rather than from those who observe it.

The primary intent of this paper, then, is to understand symbolic interactionism, its methodological implications, its limitations in exploring the empirical world, and its applicability and usefulness to higher education research. The focus is upon phenomenological symbolic interactionism which rests, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979) in the interpretive paradigm. While certainly not breaking new ground, nor intended to be all-encompassing, this paper attempts to serve as a reference for those engaged in educational research using the interpretive perspective.

Our exploration begins with a discussion of pragmatism, the philosophical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism.

About Pragmatism

William James describes a pragmatist as one who,

> ... turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth. (McDermott, 1977, p. 379)

Pragmatism addresses not the world of abstractions or objects, but the world of ideas and their workability. Truth is found in the idea and in the applicability of the idea to our own lives. (James, in McDermott, 1977) The world of abstractions, of rationalism, makes no pretense to account for the particular instance, for the world of human conduct and experience. This position assumes that truth, is an object, and is a higher order, a priori

construct, based upon pure logic and reason that remains unaffected and unchanged. Pragmatism, however, defines itself by its relationship to experience and assumes that what is held to be true, is an idea embraced because of its applicability to individual experience and obtains meaning as truth only through the extent to which the idea makes a difference in that experience. To the extent that an idea makes no difference, truth is unaffected by it.

> The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world formula or that world formula be the true one. (James, in McDermott, 1977, p. 379)

Pragmatism is both a method and a theory of truth. The method of pragmatism is rooted in the concrete, in verifiable facts which, when applied to the particular instance and determined to make a difference, changes the nature of truth. James (McDermott, 1977) describes the method of pragmatism as "an attitude of orientation" (p. 380). This attitude moves us away from general principles and toward the nature and consequences of experience.

Most critical to pragmatism is the notion of instrumentality. Instrumentality refers to the extent that our ideas are workable. The extent to which ideas are workable reflects how well they are able to be incorporated into our experience. Successful incorporation is indicative of making a difference in the particular instance and transforms the idea into a truth. The interrelationship of ideas, experience, and truth is what defines pragmatism.

The pragmatic philosophy of George Mead has seemingly served to shape the symbolic interactionist perspective. Mead concerned himself with interaction: non-symbolic and symbolic. Non-symbolic interaction, in Mead's view, was closely aligned with reflex action. Individuals responded to objects, rather than acted upon them. Further, the objects in

non-symbolic interaction gather no meaning. In symbolic interaction, the opposite is true. Individuals, as human beings, act toward objects, according to the meaning objects have to them. Meaning is derived through the processes of interpretation and definition. These two processes take place in a conversation the individual has with him or herself about the object (the process of self-indication), and also within the context of the social act. Critical to Mead's philosophy are the concepts of self and the social act, the latter transforming the self into the "I" and the "Me," respectively. These concepts are more fully developed in our discussion of symbolic interactionism.

The philosophy of Mead is interpreted by symbolic interactionists in different ways. Thus we have both structural and interpretive symbolic interactionist thought. It is these multiple interpretations that lead some to question the extent to which symbolic interactionism is able to pose itself as a unified social theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). While clearly this is an issue that symbolic interactionists ought to resolve themselves, the two schools of thought serve as a useful tool to understand differences between structural-functionalism and interpretivism.

One Framework, Two Schools of Thought

Burrell and Morgan (1979) point out that symbolic interactionism fails to present itself as a cohesive school of thought. Thus one finds, in the work of Stryker and Stratham (1985) a concern with social roles and a clear indication of a belief that while symbolic interactionism seems to fail to address the notion of structure, that it, in fact, should do so. This concern with structural elements and the identification of an a priori structure, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979), would place Stryker and Stratham (1985), representing one

school of symbolic interactionist thought, within the structural-functional paradigm. In the Burrell and Morgan schema, even though this symbolic interactionist perspective is more subjective than objective, the perspective is, nonetheless, a structural-functional one.

Representing a more interpretive, and phenomenological school of symbolic interactionist thought, is the work of Herbert Blumer (1986). The focus here is not upon unique constructs, but upon the understanding of experience from the point of view of the actor. Structure does not exist per se, but consists of mutually shared meanings that result from interaction and the reciprocal process of role-making and role-taking. It is upon this school of thought that the remainder of this paper will focus. This discussion will incorporate the philosophical influence of pragmatism and highlight the interpretive paradigm.

Phenomenological Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism obtains that reality is constructed on the basis of the interpretations individuals hold regarding the objects in their environment rather than assuming that those objects and, hence, reality, exist externally to individuals' interpretations of them. This interpretive, constructivist, perspective respresents a shift from positivism's assumptions regarding the nature of the social world and, drawing upon the work of Kuhn (1970), is referred to by some as a unique paradigm which,

> reject[s] the utility of constructing a social science which focuses upon the analysis of 'structure.' It rejects any view which attributes to the social world a reality which is independent of the minds of men. It emphasizes that the social world is no more than the subjective construction of individual human beings who, through the development and use of common language and the interactions of everyday life, may create and sustain a social world of intersubjectively shared meaning. The social world is thus of an essentially intangible nature and is in a continuous process of reaffirmation or change. (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 260)

While at first blush this sociological perspective may appear to be solipsistic, it is useful to understand that symbolic interactionists do subscribe to the notion of structure, but it is a different kind of structure than is associated with the structural-functional paradigm. Symbolic interactionism assumes that what emerges through the shared meanings individuals, interacting in groups, attribute to objects is a social order. This social order, which Blumer (1986) refers to as the obdurate social world, does not exist a priori, but it is nonetheless stubbornly resistant to change. Paradoxically then, the symbolic interactionist social order is immersed in a continuous process of change and yet, also resists change.

Assumptions and Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism

Inherent in symbolic interactionism are assumptions about how interpretations emerge and how they are incorporated into the conduct of the individual. Jacob (1987) explains that, to symbolic interactionists, individual experience is mediated by the individual's interpretations of the meaning of the experiences. Further, these interpretations arise through interaction with others. The assumptions noted by Jacob (1987) are actually reinterpretations of the basic premises posited by Blumer (1986). His premises succinctly capture the essence of symbolic interactionism.

> Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them....The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

Blumer's first premise places symbolic interactionism within the interpretive paradigm.

Reality is stripped of its structural, a priori nature and negated as a composite culture that is singly 'out there' and toward which human beings react. This premise reframes reality as something that is less certain, more emergent, and more reflexive in nature. It denies a single reality in favor of multiple realities, reflective of the interpretive paradigm of which, in organizational analysis, symbolic interactionism represents a school of thought.

Blumer's second premise places the construction of reality in a social context. Meanings are assigned to objects through interaction with others. It is interaction that provides individuals with the opportunity to float trial balloons and to modify their own beliefs, attitudes, and understandings toward and about objects based upon their interpretation of others' reactions to the same. It is through the interpretive process, Blumer's third premise, that shared meanings emerge and are maintained.

The notion of indication is fundamental to symbolic interactionism for it is the 'how' of the interpretive process. Blumer (1986) suggests that the process of indication is the means through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences. He explains that:

> to indicate something is to extricate it from its setting, to hold it apart, to give it a meaning or, in Mead's language, to make it an object. An object--that is to say, anything that an individual indicates to himself--is different from a stimulus; instead of having an intrinsic character which acts on the individual and which can be identified apart from the individual, its character or meaning as conferred on it by the individual....In any of his countless acts...the individual is designating different objects to himself, giving them meaning, judging their suitability to his action, and making decisions on the basis of the judgment. This is what is meant by interpretation or acting on the basis of symbols. (p. 80)

While indication is the process of symbolic interactionism, the product is the object, that is, what Blumer says is "anything that is pointed to or referred to" (p. 10). He classifies

objects into three categories: physical, social, and abstract. Physical objects are inanimate and are signified by such things as books, chairs, houses. Social objects represent people such as mother, friend, teacher, banker, etc. Abstract objects are those based in ideas and values such as compassion, ethical principles, justice, etc. The nature of the object depends upon the meaning the individual assigns to that object.

What we witness in symbolic interactionism is the construction of a self within a social context with the focus of the theoretical perspective upon the individual. An individual presents himself or herself to a situation and, through a process of interpretation assigns meaning to objects. The meanings assigned are the result of indication, whereby the individual evaluates, modifies, accepts, transforms, or rejects an object's meaning after an iterative process that resembles a dialectic. This dialectic involves a process of role-taking and role-making through which individual conduct is ultimately shaped. The conversation, for the individual, is between the personal self and the social self, which according to Mead (1934) is represented by the "I" and the "Me", respectively. This conversation, in any given situation, continues until the desired balance is achieved and the behavioral response selected. (Hewitt, 1990)

Mead's conception of the "I" and "Me" is one, according to Hewitt (1990) that is often not clear, particularly with respect to the meaning of "I". While the "Me" is considered and understood as the social self representing the various identities the person creates in interaction with others in various settings, the "I" represents the personal self and becomes an object of the self.

> The "I" is best understood by linking it to William James's conception of the self as "knower" versus the self as "known." That is, on the one hand, we have an aware

> and acting creature (designated by the term "I") that looks around itself and responds to events and circumstances according to its own imperatives...On the other hand, this creature also looks at and is aware of itself from the standpoint of others; it constitutes itself as a Me." More precisely, it becomes aware of the direction (that is, the objects) of its own responses to external events and, having become aware, responds to the image of itself formed as it becomes aware. This image of self acting in a particular direction is the self as a known object. (Hewitt, 1990, pp. 179-180)

Hewitt's particular agenda is toward developing a more comprehensive theory of identity and, consequently, to present a more complex portrait of self-construction that not only considers the nature and development of the self, but also the relationship of the self to society. However, before exploring this latter relationship, continued discussion of some of the fundamental concepts of symbolic interactionism that relate to the nature and development of the self seems in order. Of particular concern to symbolic interactionists are the concepts of identity, role, situation, and the notions of role-making and role-taking.

Identity, Role, Situation, Role-Making and Role-Taking

Identity, role, situation, role-making and role-taking are, to symbolic interactionists, inextricably intertwined. Heiss (1981) suggests that identity is "any characteristic that individuals use to define themselves" (p. 95). Identity, in this instance is not singular, but plural, for individuals may hold many identities. The relationship of role to identity, according to Heiss (1981) is that role reflects a set of expectations for conduct attached to identity. Finally, the expectations for conduct, or of what one should do, is determined in the particular situation and not only reflective of the individual's identity, but of the individual's interpretation of the identities of others in the particular situation.

The particular situation in which identity of self is revealed is understood by symbolic

interactionists, as situated identity, and key to situated identity is the concept of role (Hewitt, 1990). While often defined as such, role reflects more than a particular social position or status and, "is better defined as a perspective within a defined situation " (Hewitt, 1990, p. 155). In the particular situation, behaviors make sense or not inasmuch as they are interpreted by others as relating to the specified activity (Hewitt, 1990).

Although role is manifested through behavior, Hewitt is careful to caution against confusing actions with role. Actions are based upon a perspective of role within a particular situation. As he clarifies:

> Although social scientists often speak of such sets of action (or the expectations on which they are based) as roles, it is more accurate to define the role as the social perspective on which such actions are based. The pitcher's role is not what the pitcher does or is expected to do, but rather the point from which the pitcher views the activities of the game of baseball and the basis on which he calculates his own actions. The role of the sales representative does not consist of the things the individual does, but of the vantage point she occupies relative to the customer, a perspective on which her actions are based. (Hewitt, 1990, p. 155)

Similar to Mead's (1934) notion of attitude, this vantage point is situationally bound and serves to shape an individual's social behavior.

The relationship of role to the situation has support from other social psychologists. Rose (1962) refers to role as "a cluster of related meanings and values" (p. 10). He also makes clear that role guided behavior is situation, or context bound.

For Heiss (1981), "a role is a set of expectations in the sense that it is what one should do" (p. 95). These expectations are expectations of self, once again influenced and shaped by the social context.

These perspectives on role move us away from constituting role as identifiable and distinct and toward role as "a sort of ideal conception which constrains people to render any

action situation into more or less explicit collections of interacting roles" (Turner, 1962, p. 21). From an interactionist's point of view, people act in social situations as if roles really did exist. Behaviors are enabled or constrained by the self's perception of what is expected in a particular situation. Further, this perception is constantly modified through the interaction process, whereby individuals act out their understandings of their role and are then responded to by others in the social situation. This responding, in turn, provides information to the individual and is used to affirm one's expectations of self in the situation or used to modify those expectations. Turner (1962) says this more explicitly:

> Roles "exist" in varying degrees of concreteness and consistency, while the individual confidently frames his behavior as if they had unequivocal existence and clarity. The result is that in attempting from time to time to make aspects of the roles explicit he is creating and modifying roles as well as merely bringing them to light; the process is not only role-taking but role-making. (p. 22)

The roles people construct for themselves are, consequently, a result of one's own perceptions of boundaries or constraints that exist (e.g., interpretations of job descriptions, or interpretations of one's ability to influence the behavior of subordinates), and are reinforced or modified by the extent to which these boundaries are played out in context (e.g., decisions cannot be made that are perceived as "outside" the position description, or one may influence subordinate's behavior in budgetary arenas, but not in ways that affect the informal organization). This represents a reciprocal process whereby we act and react in relation to significant, or generalized others. This role reciprocity denotes interaction as a tentative process which reinforces role construction not as one's ability to perform a concrete, extant role, but to shape one's role, drawing upon a multitude of possible role performances within a social context. Further, from an interactionist's point of view, role definition is always

tentative for the perceptions of others toward the self can never be truly known, but only inferred (Turner, 1962). However fragile, the reciprocal process in which people engage to formulate role definition, is role-making and role-taking.

Key concepts in the role-making and role-taking process are self, and the other, the latter representing an individual or a more generalized other. What serves as an overlay to the role-making and role-taking process are those almost ethereal perceptual analyses, or rather, interpretations, which serve to constrain or reinforce behavior.

The twin interactive notions of role-making and role-taking reinforce the interpretive view that roles do not exist a priori, that is, that they are not a singular existential something into which people conform and learn how to do, such as learning how to "do' the father role, the teacher role, the student role, etc. The structural-functionalist perspective would assume the existence of these kinds of prescribed roles and that we behave and modify our behavior in attempts to understand the role that is prescribed for us. This position suggests that we are constantly moving toward integration into a pre-existing role rather than creating and shaping a unique role through our interpretations of expected role performance based upon our interactions with others.

Interactionists contend that individuals bring to situations some notion of what it means to be what they are to be and conduct their behavior in accordance with the particular set of expectations they bring to the situation. Further, the role that is created is a unique one mutually shaped through interaction.

To clarify this process, let us examine the constructed role of the graduate student. As a graduate student, I bring to the formal education situation a package of expectations of how

I will conduct myself in the classroom, in the library, and in interaction with faculty members, etc. These initial expectations are shaped by previous experiences I have had with student life, stories that have been transmitted to me by friends and family members who have been "graduate students", and experiences I have had as a teacher and college administrator. My expectations of what it means to be a graduate student get played out in how I conduct myself and these expectations, as shaped by my past experiences, become reinforced or modified through my interactions with others. For example, my interpretation of the graduate student role is that graduate students are supposed to say profound things in the classroom setting and that is the behavior expected of them by faculty members. So I attempt to do that and am not positively reinforced by the faculty member. At this point I go through a process of interpretation that may serve to modify this expectation and change my behavior in the future. Was my comment not profound? If reinforced by other classmates that indeed, my comment was profound, then I search for another interpretation of my rebuff. Am I not liked? Previous interactions with this faculty member have seemed to prove otherwise, so I continue my search. Does this faculty member not want graduate students to speak in class? In examining the faculty member's reactions to other students who speak, this interpretation seems to fit and I modify my conduct and, in turn, my own understanding of the graduate student role regarding speaking in class.

In this instance, I am in the process of role-making and role-taking. I am modifying my understanding of what it means to be a graduate student in this situation, but I am only able to do so through an interpretation of other's reactions to my own interpretations. While initially I enter the situation with my own set of experiential luggage which I believed was

similar to that of others, I was faced with a need to figuratively unpack and repack as I learned about perceptual differences that served to modify behavior.

This example begins to demonstrate a processual view of role construction that is consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective. This process remains intact even when behavior and relationships are formally indicated as in, for example, position descriptions in organizations. Position descriptions serve not as prescriptions for behavior, but as the skeletal frame of rules that constrain and enable behavior (Turner, 1962). In essence, position descriptions do not instruct us on what to do, they provide the boundaries within which we may act.

A unique overlay to role-making and role-taking is the negotiation process. Roles, as expectations of behavior, are constructed, with others, through a mutually-shaping process of interaction. Inherent in this mutually-shaping process is negotiation. This perspective lends a different twist to Strauss'(1978) concept of negotiated order. That perspective is more concerned with the notion of structure than the construction of self (Hewitt, 1990). However, what is most useful in applying Strauss' key negotiation concepts of tradeoffs, kickbacks, compromising, paying off debts, etc. to the process of role-making and role-taking, is that it frames the role-making, role-taking process in the form of a problematic, not as a smooth, easy process, but as one that is filled with tension as the individual struggles and assesses the appropriateness of role within a situation; or, to use the language of symbolic interactionism, as one attempts to align one's own actions with those with whom one is interacting.

The Methodological Implications of Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1986) considers symbolic interactionism as a philosophical doctrine and as a perspective from which to understand human group life and conduct. Symbolic interactionism accepts and considers the world as an empirical social world and, consequently, the methods used to uncover verifiable truths are those that respect the world as one that is experienced. Thus, only those methods that lead to direct examination of this world are appropriate. Blumer elaborates on the inappropriateness of using positivistic methods to explore the empirical social world.

> ...the four customary means--adhering to scientific protocol, engaging in replication, testing hypotheses, and using operational procedure--do not provide the empirical validation that genuine empirical social science requires. They give no assurance that premises, problems, data, relations, concepts, and interpretations are empirically valid. Very simply put, the only way to get this assurance is to go directly to the empirical social world....(p. 32)

In order to understand human group life, symbolic interactionism maintains that the researcher must explore how individuals align their actions with one another. In order to understand how this alignment takes place, one must examine the experience of the individual actor. This examination is more than mere objective observation. It is a direct examination of the individual's experience in order to understand, from that individual's perspective, the objects that constitute his or her world and the meaning of those objects. This is an exploration of the process of indication and the aligning of actions with others, whether those others be singular or generalized, informal or formal, linked by meaningful ongoing actions. It is a world, according to Blumer (1986) of discovery, of a careful digging out and probing of experience.

The methodological stance of symbolic interactionism respects the nature of empirical

science. Implicit in this respect is the use of a naturalistic approach and, in turn, qualitative methods for those are the methods of direct examination of the social world. This direct examination, according to Blumer (1986),

> permits the scholar to meet all of the basic requirements of an empirical science: to confront an empirical world that is available for observation and analysis; to raise abstract problems with regard to that world; to gather necessary data through careful and disciplined examination of that world; to unearth relations between categories of such data; to formulate propositions with regard to such relations; to weave such propositions into a theoretical scheme; and to test the problems, the data, the relations, the propositions, and the theory by renewed examination of the empirical world. (p. 48)

Limitations of Symbolic Interactionism

With its focus upon role in the particular situation, symbolic interactionism, as a theoretical framework, has difficulty grappling with notions much broader in scope. In particular, symbolic interactionism does not deal especially well with the concept of culture, nor with identity in any sense that would relate it to the relationship of self to specific social units. While symbolic interactionism, as a whole, does not grapple well with these issues which ultimately examine the nature of structure (Stryker and Stratham, 1985), there has been some movement to fill this void.

Hewitt (1990) has begun to explore this structural void in relationship to modern American culture. He first suggests that modernity equates with complexity and that this complexity has moved American culture away from organic community toward communal modes of participation, which are more temporal and, at times, more tentative in nature. He distinguishes between organic communities which, in times past, were the means through which individuals constructed and maintained their "selves," and the emergent, modern

society, with its focus upon individual freedom and self-reliance. The former, smaller, community, has connotations of warmth and security while the larger society, has connotations of cold indifference and freedom from authority. As an inherent part of modernity, according to Hewitt, individuals experience dilemmas that pull them in opposite directions--at once toward the warmth, security, and dependence of community and the independence and personal freedom of society.

Further, Hewitt (1990) posits that identity is not only a multiple phenomenon, representative of the conventional wisdom of symbolic interactionists, but also a bi-faceted phenomenon. In modern American culture, individuals have personal identities and social identities. The former referring to those identities reflective of the need for autonomy and the latter gleaned through association with others.

Finally, Hewitt (1990) deals with the concept of culture. While he maintains that culture is external to the individual, it is not the same as the structural-functional view of external. In Hewitt's view, culture is an environment; an environment that emerges and is sustained through the shared meanings individuals, interacting in that environment, ascribe to objects. Ultimately, then, culture is the world of objects. This world of objects provides the boundaries that constrain or enable our behavior.

What this discussion of identity, structure, and culture depicts is a theoretical framework that is continuously considering itself and grappling with those issues that have historically determined a lack of cohesion within the framework. Through this reconsideration of key concepts, perhaps symbolic interactionism will develop the cohesion that some feel is missing, be able to satisfy those in both schools of thought, and present

itself as one.

Contributions to Higher Education Research and Conclusions

Recognizing that the symbolic interactionist perspective examines the empirical social world from the individual actor's point of view, what contributions can this perspective make to research in higher education? I'd like to suggest at least two and, using this author's research as an example, demonstrate how the perspective can lead us to deeper insights about the social world. First, given that symbolic interactionism is an interpretive research framework, it offers the potential for gathering more indepth data. The qualitative methods used in symbolic interactionism allow for the gathering of rich, contextual data that quantitative methods alone seem unable to gather. This has seemingly been the recurrent challenge to using quantitative methods to explore the social world and one of the recurrent themes in the qualitative/quantitative debate of the past.

Second, symbolic interactionism can contribute to a richer understanding of both the individual actor in a group setting as well as the group itself. This perspective carries with it a methodological imperative to examine the social world from the actor's vantage point. Through symbolic interactionism we come to understand the actor as a self-indicating individual and as an interacting member of formal and informal social groups. With the latter, we come to understand how the actor aligns his or her actions with others. Group behavior is then viewed as an emerging social process that consists of individual actors aligning their actions with each other and coming to terms with shared meanings toward objects. Given this emerging, processual view of group conduct, we develop an alternative

view of culture and see it as an environment, rather than a construct. We then more clearly come to understand how, in groups, the introduction of new actors or the absence of others has the potential to influence which objects have meaning, which do not, and understand the nature of cultural change. Symbolic interactionism allows us to explore culture and change from the perspective of those who shape the cultural environment.

This author's research is provided as an example to demonstrate how the symbolic interactionist perspective can lead us to deeper insights about the social world. The study (Roberts, forthcoming) is one that explores role-culture congruity.

Role, in this study, was explored from the perspective of the collegiate mid-level manager (deans and directors of administrative areas) and was viewed as a process whereby behavioral expectations are formulated through previous experiences and in interaction with others. Culture was understood as an environment of shared meaning regarding objects and, thus, behavioral expectations. The shared meanings regarding behavioral expectations of the mid-level managers were explored from the point of view of other actors in the environment. The notion of role-culture congruity emerged as comparisons were made between and among the expectations mid-level managers held for themselves and those held by other members of the cultural environment. From this comparison of expectations, three factors influencing role-culture congruity were posited: time, space, and ghosts. Time referred to the amount of time the mid-level manager had been in the formal position. Space reflected geographic proximity which seemed to affect interaction patterns. Finally, ghosts were those people who have influenced the expectations of other actors in the culture and, most often it is posited, the primary ghost is the mid-level manager's predecessor.

As a framework, symbolic interactionism guided this research to uncover what Geertz (1973) referred to as "the unapparent import of things" (p. 26). Symbolic interactionism challenges researchers to directly examine the social world and to develop a portrait of the individual actor that includes past and present experience as well as future dreams. In this way, symbolic interactionism challenges researchers to frame questions that get beneath the surface of what is seen and what is heard; to explore the here and now, but to do so in a way that examines perspectives and insights that actors bring to the here and now. Through this framework we seek to piece together the complex world of the individual. The cultural landscape thus becomes a multi-dimensional one full of tensions and resolutions as individuals interact and negotiate with each other to come to terms with meaning regarding objects of importance to them. This alternative view then, provides us with a deeper understanding of the empirical social world, from the point of view of those individual actors who participate in it.

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